

STORIETTES

Father and Son

BY MARGARET BUSBEE SHIPP

"WHAT is the matter? I knew all through dinner that something was bothering you."

Miller and his wife were in the library, and from the adjoining room came the chatter of their two children.

"Probably it will prove to be nothing. Dortch came to the office to-day, and told me that when he drove by our place yesterday he noticed Hannah in the yard. He said she cooked for them last year, and they found out that she was a regular nicotine fiend—that she stole his cigars, taught his boy to smoke, and raised the mischief generally."

"Oh, I'm sure she couldn't influence David!" cried Mrs. Miller, with the quick mother-instinct of defense.

"I don't know. She has always seemed so fond of the children that they have been with her a great deal. Whenever we are both out of the way, we've left them to Hannah to look after, instead of to Polly. Dave will tell me the truth about it—he doesn't lie, thank Heaven! But if I find that that eleven-year-old boy has picked up a forbidden habit and has concealed it from me—"

Miller broke off. Then he called his son, in the voice at once so firm and kindly which his children loved. David came running at the summons, and rubbed his head against his father's arm like an affectionate Newfoundland pup. His sister, two years younger, trotted in after him.

"David, I want you to tell me whether or not you have been smoking."

The question was answered in the affirmative in an unexpected but conclusive manner, for little Elinor burst into tears. Her mother gathered her into her arms, but she sobbed as one who could not be comforted.

"So you have smoked?" said Miller slowly.

"Yes, sir."

"For how long?"

David considered.

"It was Thanksgiving, first time. Hannah said it was a sin to waste all the good stumps the company threw away, and asked me to bring them to her."

Miller used a number of cigarettes a day, because he never relighted one, and rarely took more than a single draw.

"You have been gathering up stumps for two months and dividing with the cook?"

"Is 'dividing' taking half? Hannah kept most of them. When she makes a big cake, she always makes a teeny one for me and Elinor; and she never fusses at us like the other cooks did. She likes me because I bring her the cigarettes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted so bad to tell!" Elinor sobbed out. "I didn't want secrets. Hannah said it was fun for little girls to have secrets, but I like to tell mine to mother."

"That devil didn't try to make *you* smoke?"

Miller's eyes gleamed with sudden red as he rose from his chair and laid a hand on the mass of curls with passionate, protective tenderness.

"Hannah wanted to learn me, but I never tried, 'cause David said I mustn't. He said mother didn't smoke, so I mustn't, and father did, so he wanted to learn."

"Take Elinor to bed and get her quiet, Kate," Miller directed his wife. "She's out of this; I ought to have known she would be."

David needed discipline as often as other robust and healthy specimens of boyhood. When the subject of punishment came up, there were times when his mother felt prompted to make suggestions, and, at rare intervals, to interfere. Now, as she left the room, she turned to look at her husband

with a wistful helplessness in her face. It was a crisis in their boy's relation to his parents which she did not know how to meet, and she felt relieved that she was not called upon to cope with a situation so wholly masculine.

Miller was almost equally at sea.

"If you had come to me—"

David hung his head.

"I *liked* it, father, and I knew you'd make me stop if you found out."

Miller was silent for a moment, while the lines from "The Mikado" hummed through his brain:

My object all sublime
I shall achieve in time—
To make the punishment fit the crime.

It did not seem to him to be an occasion for a thrashing. Sometimes there were those occasions, and he rose to them reluctantly, administering the thrashing with decision and despatch; and his boy and himself were never the worse friends afterward. That was why this hurt so. He and Dave were such chums that it was hard to understand how his negro cook could have tempted the youngster away from his intimate, confidential relation with his father.

The main thing was to stop the smoking at once. Distinct among Miller's memories of his own boyhood was his first cigarette. He still recalled that the brand bore the dashing name of "Four Aces," though he had never seen a package since. He had hidden in the orchard that his mother might not smell his breath, until the agony of nausea and the certainty of impending death had driven him to confession.

His mind was made up now. He opened his cigarette-case and held it toward David.

"Have one?"

The words were command rather than interrogation. Puzzled, David took one and lit it. So did his father, though the single puff of the older man lacked its usual soothing flavor.

When David had finished his, he said in his honest fashion:

"Whole ones *are* better. I've just had 'ducks' before."

"Take another!"

There was no mistaking the command this time. David, again with surprise but with distinct pleasure, took the second cigarette and smoked it through. Miller expected the boy to turn pale, to be unable to finish, or to show some sign of physical

distress, but nothing could have been clearer than the blue of David's eye or the apple color of his cheeks. Miller gritted his teeth and determined to see it through.

"Try a cigar."

David's eyes once more brightened with anticipation. He blundered a little in managing it, but finally "got it going," as he phrased it.

Somehow the movement of the boy's hands as he lit it, the tilt of his head as he smoked, smote Miller's heart with pangs of fatherhood. How absurdly like himself David was! The same hair, close-clipped because both hated the tendency to curl; the same straight-gazing, blue eyes; the same merry mockery in the corners of the mouth. He thought of the pleasure he had found in tobacco, the sense of silent companionship with other men which it had given him. It was absurd to expect his little chap not to smoke; the only thing was to prevent the habit while it might stunt the development of that sturdy young frame.

Yet, as Miller sat there, waiting for the boy to grow sick, he began to feel strangely ashamed.

"It's fighting below the belt—literally, not figuratively. I can't do it! I've always stood firm on any stand I've taken with the children, but I shall have to back down on this," Miller thought. Then he said aloud: "David, throw away your cigar now."

But in the midst of his defeat, victory came unexpectedly. David, even David—trained since babyhood not to cry for bumps and bruises—broke into a gust of tears.

"Oh, father, you're so good, and I'm so dog-gone mean! When Mr. Dortch found out Alex smoked, he whipped him so hard that Alex had to bring a pillow to sit down on when he went to dinner. And you, you just treat me like a man and give me cigars!" The boy choked, unable to find the phrases for his tumultuous feelings. "And, father, I won't do it any more. It was sneaking, and I won't smoke any more until you say I can. I promise you I won't! I won't fool you about it."

"Nor I you." Miller spoke as man to man. "I was making you smoke because I hoped it would make you so sick that you would never wish to do it again. After all, that's a little-boy remedy, like putting soap on your tongue when you say a bad word. I'll leave it to you, David. I don't want

you to smoke before you are eighteen. I don't ask you to promise me you will not, but I ask you to promise that if you do smoke, it will be with me."

David had stopped crying, and his voice was as controlled as his father's as he answered:

"I promise. I like to."

As he looked into the candid depths of the boy's eyes, Miller felt, with a sweeping sense of thankfulness, that he had always been able to depend on his son's word.

Instead of the usual good-night peck at Miller's brow, father and son shook hands quietly on their compact.

"Won't it be bully, father, when I'm old enough for us to smoke together?"

"Fine, old man. Good night!"

Presently Mrs. Miller came in. Two spots of color were burning brightly in her cheeks. Her expression was so belligerent, as contrasted with the fragile daintiness of

her appearance, that Miller found relief in a laugh as he took her in his arms.

"Well, it's all right with Dave and me, dear. But what have you been doing?"

"Dismissing Hannah, of course."

"I can never understand you women!" groaned her husband. "After all the trouble she has given us, why add the inconvenience of having to get breakfast yourself?"

"I could not sleep with a viper in the basement. Now tell me about David."

"I determined to make him sick of tobacco once for all, and what do you suppose? That little rascal smoked two cigarettes and half a cigar, and it did not faze him!"

There was no mistaking the note of pride in Miller's voice.

"You—you are actually *bragging* about it!" gasped his wife. "I can never understand you men!"